

Love in a Warm Climate

I read an article recently that suggested that France's enthusiastic entry into the 35-hour week had left its inhabitants with more time for leisure activities such as boules, wine, their children - and *l'amour*. Great, I thought, if ever I make that long-cherished move to France and join my French boyfriend, we'll spend more time together and I'll spend less time working.



Susannah and Richard together in a warm climate!

pay was good, I chose my own company car - a much-admired Audi A3 - and I had a pretty terraced cottage in leafy Greenwich. Where I lived on my own. And that was the problem.

Richard, my boyfriend, lived and worked in a remote village in the Var, where I had a holiday home. I'd met him at the opening night of a new bar in the village. The drinks were free and villagers and second-homers alike were there making the most of it. We got talking or, rather, he came over to talk to me and then I did all the talking. That was in spite of the fact that French was Richard's first - and only - language and my second. He was uncharacteristically quiet for a Frenchman, though I did manage to find out that he ran a rural enterprise with his sister distributing foliage to flower markets and wholesalers, that he liked playing boules and shooting wild boar. And he had a nice twinkly smile that didn't quite seem to square with killing boar.

It was Richard's - dare I say it - almost English restraint rather than his stereotypically French hobbies that appealed to me. Here was a man who didn't boast, didn't play the Latin lover like a bad ham actor or try to impress with you his status. So I broke my First Commandment - thou shalt not go out with any of the men in the village where thou hast a holiday home - and Richard and I saw each other whenever I could make time to fly down there.

This became ridiculously frequent. I even persuaded my boss that he should let me work out of the office every other Friday. On the prescribed day, I'd jump on a flight with my laptop at 7.15 on a Friday morning and spend three days at my French house, one of them working in a state of severe fatigue and two of them enjoying Richard's company in the warm sunshine of Provence.

And then, of course, I'd go back home again to London and the daily grind. Often I'd return from work at about 8 on a rainy evening (no 35-hour-week for me) and get a call from Richard telling me how sunny it was in the South of France and how tired he was, having been forced to work until 5.30pm! Somehow I hadn't got the balance right!

But suddenly everything changed. I got a new boss who was asked to cut staff. I volunteered myself for redundancy because I knew exactly what I'd do. I'd work for myself, become a freelance writer and take myself off to France, at least for a while. There'd be no more meetings, no more staff performance appraisals and, alas, no more regular salary magically paid into my bank account every month.

I was on my own. Or, to be precise, I was swapping the life of the sophisticated solo-girl in London for life *à deux* in the *Provençal* countryside.

The day I arrived, my company car heavily charged with possessions, I met Richard coming out of a wedding ceremony at the village church. I quickly washed and changed and went with him to the reception, where my place setting firmly labelled me as Richard's wife. I thought this a little premature an hour into my new life but, hey, it seemed like a good omen, so who was I to complain! Richard beamed with delight.

Friends arrived from the UK to take the company car back to Reader's Digest, leaving me in my little stone house on an olive and oak dotted hillside in the Var. I've been here just over a month now, which is just about long enough to work out the similarities and the differences between French and English men.

Frenchmen are often hopelessly romantic - there's my neighbour who left a flowery message for a woman in a faraway village he had visited, asking her to contact him. But then I discovered it was because she was the spitting image of the woman who had lived with him and left him, and he wanted to parade her double so his ex would be confused when she heard about it. Romance? Revenge more like. But wasn't it in France that murdering your wife was considered not to be punishable crime?

Richard may be a wildboar crackshot, win local boules tournaments and know his *girolles* from his *cèpes* when he goes mushrooming - I don't know any Brits who do that, even the ones who live in the sticks - but he's as domestically challenged as most of his British counterparts. And as permanently exhausted. There's no such thing as a 35-hour week for a Frenchman who runs his own business. So much for that myth about French lovers!

But, then again, there's an old Chinese proverb that defines happiness as three things: someone to love, something to do and something to hope for. That holds good in France, just as it does in Britain, China or anywhere else.

By Susannah Hickling